

## Milley talks to Taliban, unannounced

*Associated Press*

KABUL, Afghanistan — The top U.S. general held unannounced talks with Taliban peace negotiators in the Persian Gulf to urge a reduction in violence across Afghanistan, even as senior American officials in Kabul warned that stepped-up Taliban attacks endanger the militant group's nascent peace negotiations with the Afghan government.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met for about two hours with Taliban negotiators in Doha, Qatar, on Tuesday and flew Wednesday to Kabul to discuss the peace process with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

Although Milley reported no breakthrough, his Taliban meetings represent a remarkable milestone — America's top general coming face-to-face with representatives of the group that ruled Afghanistan until it was ousted 19 years ago this month in the early stages of what became America's longest war. Milley served three tours of duty in Afghanistan, the first in 2003 and the last in 2013-14.

Milley's meetings came amid a new drawdown of U.S. troops, although under current U.S. policy a complete pullout hinges on the Taliban reducing attacks nation-

wide.

"The most important part of the discussions that I had with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan was the need for an immediate reduction in violence," Milley told three reporters, including one from The Associated Press, who accompanied him to Qatar and Afghanistan. "Everything else hinges on that."

Under ground rules set by Milley for security reasons, the journalists traveling with him agreed not to report on either set of talks until he had departed the region. It was Milley's second unannounced meeting with the Taliban's negotiating team; the first, in June, also in Doha, had not been reported until now.

Army Gen. Scott Miller, the top commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, said in an interview at his military headquarters in Kabul on Wednesday that the Taliban have stepped up attacks on Afghan forces, particularly in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, and against roadways and other infrastructure.

"My assessment is, it puts the peace process at risk — the higher the violence, the higher the risk," Miller said. Miller meets at least once a month with Taliban negotiators as part of Washington's effort to advance a

peace process.

Speaking in the same interview, Ross Wilson, the ranking American diplomat in Kabul, said he also sees growing risk from Taliban violence.

He said it has created "an unbearable burden" on the Afghan armed forces and the society as a whole.

In the so-called Doha agreement signed last February by the United States and the Taliban, the administration of President Donald Trump agreed to a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops, going down to zero troops by May 2021 if the agreement's conditions are upheld.

One condition is a reduction in violence by the Taliban, leading to a nationwide ceasefire. The Taliban also agreed to begin peace negotiations with the Afghan government, which are in an early stage.

The Taliban have demanded a halt to U.S. airstrikes, which have been conducted since February only in support of Afghan forces under Taliban attack.

Miller said he was saddened by what he called the Taliban's deliberate campaign to damage roadways, bridges and other infrastructure as part of the militants' effort to limit the Afghan government's ability to reinforce its troops.

## In a first, the Air Force uses AI aboard a military jet

*The Washington Post*

The Air Force allowed an artificial-intelligence algorithm to control sensor and navigation systems on a U2 Dragon Lady spy plane in a training flight Tuesday, officials said, marking what is believed to be the first known use of AI onboard a U.S. military aircraft.

No weapons were involved, and the plane was steered by a pilot. Even so, senior defense officials touted the test as a watershed moment in the Defense Department's attempts to incorporate AI into military aircraft, a subject that is of intense debate in aviation and arms control communities.

"This is the first time this has ever happened," Assistant Air Force Secretary Will

Roper said.

Former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt, who previously headed the Pentagon's Defense Innovation Board, described Tuesday's flight test as "the first time, to my knowledge, that you have a military system integrating AI, probably in any military."

The AI system was deliberately designed without a manual override in order to "provoke thought and learning in the test environment," Air Force spokesman Josh Benedetto said in an email.

It was relegated to highly-specific tasks and walled off from the plane's flight controls, according to people involved in the flight test.

"For the most part I was still very much

the pilot in command," the U2 pilot who carried out Tuesday's test told The Washington Post.

The pilot spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of his work. The Air Force later released photos from shortly before the test flight with materials that referenced only his call sign: "Vudu."

"[The AI's] role was very narrow . . . but, for the tasks the AI was presented with, it performed well," the pilot said.

The two-and-a-half-hour-long test was performed in a routine training mission at Beale Air Force Base, near Marysville, Calif., starting Tuesday morning.

# Base command warns of 100s quarantined

BY ERICA EARL  
AND JOSEPH DITZLER  
*Stars and Stripes*

TOKYO — Japan's capital city reported a record-breaking 822 new coronavirus cases Thursday, a 17% jump above a record set the previous day, according to public broadcaster NHK and metro government data.

South of central Tokyo, the commander of Yokosuka Naval Base said the number of patients there is greater now than ever before during the pandemic.

To forestall the virus's further spread, Capt. Rich Jarrett imposed new restrictions: gatherings may not exceed five individuals or two family groups, Yokohama is off-limits, the surrounding Kanagawa prefecture is now a high-risk area subject to further restrictions and use of public transportation should be kept to a minimum.

A number of "index" infections resulted

when people from the base "willfully disobeyed health protection measures that we established to protect our community," Jarrett said in a video message Thursday on Facebook.

"These individuals then brought illness to their place of work and to their shipmates they work with," he said.

Consequently, hundreds of service members and their families will spend the holidays in quarantine, Jarrett said. "This outcome is unacceptable, and it was almost entirely preventable."

This was an "extremely disappointing lack of discipline," Command Master Chief Derek Mullenhour said in the same video.

The naval base on Tuesday said 11 new coronavirus cases had appeared since Friday, many of them linked to forbidden activities, such as trips to bars and restaurant dining in Yokohama and Tokyo.

Jarrett did not mention Thursday's number, but the base reported 43 new patients on Tuesday. So far this month, it has reported 52 infections.

Jarrett said he hoped to avoid a return to Health Protection Condition-Charlie, and tougher restrictions on movement and activity that would complicate the base's mission.

Japan has reported 247 coronavirus deaths since Sunday, surpassing its previous record of 222 deaths within one week, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The U.S. military in Japan announced one new infection as of 6 p.m. Thursday.

Misawa Air Base reported that one person, who recently arrived in Japan on a commercial flight, tested positive within a day of exiting the mandatory two-week quarantine, according to a Facebook post. The individual was quarantined again, along with two close contacts.

## Rand report highlights potential for assistance from Japan to US

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS  
*Stars and Stripes*

A new Rand Corp. report released Thursday found that the Japan Self-Defense Forces could offer "effective and capable" assistance to the United States should a conflict erupt with China in the East China Sea.

Japan's Constitution restricts its military operations to defensive initiatives only, and its laws may hinder its efforts, according to the report. Still, Japan's strengths position it "to make things very difficult for China to prevail quickly in conflict," according to the think tank report.

"Much relies on Japan's political decisionmakers, who, in a time of a crisis, will be challenged to ensure that their decision-making timelines are fully in sync with U.S. operational needs," the report said.

Japanese strengths include advanced weaponry, a greater presence in the Ryukyu Islands southwest of the main islands of Japan, and capabilities in minesweeping and anti-submarine warfare.

The report, "Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency," called the U.S. alliance with Japan "arguably its most important in pursuit of objec-

tives" outlined in the National Defense Strategy.

That strategy, written in 2018 by then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, formally shifted U.S. defense priorities to the Indo-Pacific region and strategic competition with China. Since then, the military has boosted its presence in the South and East China seas, which Beijing views as its territory. The U.S. considers those regions to be international waters, and the Navy and Air Force frequently carry out freedom-of-navigation operations there, sailing through and flying over waters that China claims as its own.

In the East China Sea, China and Taiwan dispute sovereignty of the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands northeast of Taiwan. The Trump and Obama administrations have said an attack on the Senkakus would invoke the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, meaning the U.S. military would be obligated to respond.

The Rand report comes after the defense ministers of Japan and China in a video call Monday reaffirmed their countries' opposing claims to the islands, which the Chinese call Diaoyu Dau.

## Police: Man turned down by Army shot at recruiting center

*Associated Press*

GREENSBORO, N.C. — A North Carolina man shot at an Army recruiting station after being rejected from joining the Armed Forces branch, authorities said.

James Alexander Cooper, 36, was charged Monday with six counts of assault with a deadly weapon, discharging a firearm into occupied property, discharging a firearm in city limits and carrying a concealed weapon, news outlets reported.

A statement from Army spokeswoman Lisa Ferguson said no one was wounded during the shooting, though the gunfire damaged the building's entrance, The News & Observer reported.

Greensboro police spokesman Ronald Glenn said officers responded to the center Monday evening and arrested Cooper at the scene.

Glenn said Cooper also had "several orders for arrest related to previous charges."

Ferguson said Cooper had applied to join the Army but was disqualified. It's unclear how many times Cooper previously applied for the Armed Forces branch. It's also unclear why he was rejected.

# Jobless claims rise to 885K as virus surges

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose again last week to 885,000, the highest weekly total since September, as a resurgence of coronavirus cases threatens the economy's recovery from its springtime collapse.

The Labor Department said Thursday that the number of applications increased from 862,000 the previous week. It showed that nine months after the virus paralyzed the economy, many employers are still slashing jobs as the pandemic forces more business restrictions and leads many consumers to stay home. The number of claims was much higher than

the 800,000 that economists had expected.

Before the coronavirus erupted in March, weekly jobless claims had typically numbered only about 225,000. The far-higher current pace reflects an employment market under stress and diminished job security for many.

The total number of people who are receiving traditional state unemployment benefits fell to 5.5 million from 5.8 million. That figure is down sharply from its peak of nearly 23 million in May. It means that some jobless Americans are finding jobs and no longer receiving aid. But it also indicates that many of the unemployed have used up their state benefits, which typically expire after six months.

With layoffs still elevated and new confirmed viral cases in the United States now exceeding 200,000 a day on average, the economy's modest recovery is increasingly in danger. States and cities are issuing mask mandates, limiting the size of gatherings, restricting restaurant dining, closing gyms or reducing the hours and capacity of bars, stores and other businesses.

"U.S. weekly jobless claims continue to head in the wrong direction," Edward Moya, an analyst at the currency trading firm OANDA, wrote in a research note. "The labor market outlook is bleak as the winter wave of the virus is going to lead to more shutdowns."

## Close but not yet: Deal near on bill for relief aid

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Congressional negotiators are closing in on a \$900 billion COVID-19 economic relief package that would deliver additional help to businesses, \$300-per-week jobless checks and \$600 stimulus payments to most Americans. But there was no deal reached quite yet.

The long-delayed measure was coming together as Capitol Hill combatants finally fashioned difficult compromises, often at the expense of more ambitious Democratic wishes for the legislation, to complete the second major relief package of the coronavirus pandemic.

A hoped-for announcement Wednesday failed to materialize as lawmakers across

the spectrum hammered out details of the sprawling legislation and top negotiators continued to trade offers. But lawmakers briefed on the outlines of the aid bill freely shared them.

It's the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the landmark CARES Act in March, which delivered \$1.8 trillion in aid and more generous jobless benefits and direct payments to individuals. Since then, Democrats have repeatedly called for ambitious further federal steps to provide relief and battle the pandemic, while Republicans have sought to more fully reopen the economy and to avoid padding the government's \$27 trillion debt.

President-elect Joe Biden is eager for an

aid package to prop up the economy and deliver direct aid to the jobless and hungry, even though the package falls short of what Democrats want. He called the emerging version "an important down payment" and promised more help next year.

Republicans, too, are anxious to approve some aid before going home for the year.

"We're still close and we're gonna get there," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, of Kentucky, told reporters Wednesday evening as he left the Capitol. And during a Senate GOP lunchtime call a day earlier, party leaders stressed the importance of reaching an agreement before the upcoming Georgia Senate runoff election.

## Biden picks deal-makers, fighters for climate, energy team

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Joe Biden is picking deal-makers and fighters to lead a climate team he'll ask to remake and clean up the nation's transportation and power-plant systems, and as fast as politically possible.

While the president-elect's picks have the experience to do the heavy lifting required in a climate overhaul of the U.S. economy, they also seem to be reassuring skeptics that he won't neglect the low-income, working class and minority communities hit hardest by fossil fuel pollution and climate change.

Progressives, energy lobbyists, environmental groups and auto workers on Wednesday welcomed Biden's choice of power for-

mer South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg as transportation secretary. His expected picks of former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm for energy secretary and former Environmental Protection Agency chief Gina McCarthy as leader of domestic climate efforts were also met with general applause.

Along with the yet-to-be-named heads of EPA and the Interior Department, Buttigieg, Granholm and McCarthy will be part of an effort to rapidly build and develop technology to retool the United States' transportation and power grid systems from petroleum and coal to a greater reliance on solar, wind and other environmentally friendly forms of energy.

Democratic Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico is considered the frontrunner for Interior — and won a key endorsement Wednesday from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — but Biden has not announced his choice. If selected, Haaland would be the first Native American to serve as a Cabinet secretary.

Biden has pledged to make slowing the impacts of climate change a top priority and has laid out an ambitious plan to reduce U.S. greenhouse emissions to net-zero by 2050. The plan includes an immediate return to the global 2015 Paris Agreement on climate and a pledge to stop all climate-damaging emissions from U.S. power plants by 2035.



# Calif. sets records for virus cases, deaths

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Two people are dying of COVID-19 every hour in California's most populous county as the state set daily records for newly reported cases and deaths, and hospitals struggle to keep up with the surge of coronavirus patients.

Most California residents are under a stay-at-home order because of dwindling intensive care unit capacity where they live. Los Angeles County, home to 10 million people, has 2,500 ICU beds but could easily need far more within a month, said Dr. Christina Ghaly, the county's health services director.

Southern California and the Central Valley — regions that together have 23 counties — exhausted their regular supply of intensive care beds, and many medical centers were tapping into their "surge" capacity.

## Hawaii

HONOLULU — Hawaii's governor on Wednesday reduced the state's quarantine period for arriving travelers to 10 days from 14 days based on updated recommendations from public health officials. The new rule takes effect Thursday.

Travelers to every part of the state except Kauai County may still avoid quarantine if they get a negative result on a COVID-19 test taken 72 hours prior to their departure. They must have the negative result before beginning the final leg of their trip.

Hawaii Gov. David Ige's office said in a statement that he changed the rule based on recommendations issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the state Department of Health.

## Wisconsin

MADISON — The latest court challenge to a move made by Gov. Tony Evers to slow the spread of the coronavirus in Wisconsin comes before the state Supreme Court on Thursday, this time related to an order limiting how many people can gather in bars and restaurants.

The on-again, off-again order that expired in November is one of a series that the Democratic governor has issued in reaction to the coronavirus pandemic, all of which have been challenged by conservatives.

The case before the court Thursday centers on statewide capacity limits ordered in October by Evers' Department of Health Services secretary, Andrea Palm. The order expired on Nov. 6, but the legal question of whether it was legally issued persists and the resolution will affect future public

health orders.

Palm wants to issue a new order limiting indoor capacity, which would remain in effect for 28 days, but she doesn't feel she can legally do so until the court rules in the case, attorneys for the state Department of Justice said in legal filings. Palm said Wednesday that the ability for her to issue health emergency orders pertaining to COVID-19, a measles outbreak or whatever else may happen, is "really critical to our work."

## Washington

SEATTLE — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee is loosening school reopening guidelines amid a resurging coronavirus pandemic and pleading with reluctant teachers to return to the classroom, particularly those tasked with educating the youngest and neediest students.

The governor acknowledged he'd have to win some teachers over and would consider their safety concerns and risk factors as the state rolls out its COVID-19 vaccine program, but he stopped short of committing to have teachers jump ahead in the line.

Inslee, a Democrat, unveiled the state's latest reopening standards on Wednesday, which urge schools to begin phasing in in-person learning no matter what the community COVID-19 infection rates are, and to resist reverting back to remote learning should transmissions further increase.

## Missouri

O'FALLON — Missouri Gov. Mike Parson on Wednesday lauded the rollout of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine, but it appears the second-week supply will be thousands of doses smaller than anticipated.

Missouri received about 51,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine this week, and vaccinations of frontline health care workers began Monday. The state initially said it would get another 63,675 doses of the Pfizer vaccine next week, as well as 105,300 doses of the Moderna vaccine if that version receives federal clearance.

Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services Director Dr. Randall Williams said it now appears that Missouri's next batch of the Pfizer vaccine will be 25% to 30% less than originally expected. He said the variance was "not unanticipated" given the vast rollout nationwide, but he's still trying to determine from federal officials what changed.

## Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — New Orleans bars

won't have to send patrons onto the street because city residents have heeded warnings that the city might have to tighten coronavirus restrictions, city officials said Wednesday.

Numbers remain higher than they were six weeks ago and are still higher than officials would like them to be, but don't "cross the threshold that would close our bars to indoor seating," said Dr. Jennifer Avegno, head of the city health department.

"In no way are we out of the woods at all," Mayor LaToya Cantrell said during a live-streamed news conference with Avegno. However, she said, the percentage of positive tests — which had hit 5.2% — has fallen back below 5%.

## Alabama

BIRMINGHAM — Short of staff as COVID-19 cases increase rapidly, UAB Hospital is bringing in more than 120 students and faculty members from the University of Alabama at Birmingham nursing school to help care for patients sickened by the coronavirus pandemic, officials said Wednesday.

The hospital, which has already enlisted retired nurses to assist with care, will use faculty members and graduate students, all licensed registered nurses, to fill out patient care teams. Undergraduate students will serve as technicians and assist with vaccine distribution, the hospital said in a statement.

Almost 50 of the new workers are faculty members, while more than 70 are nursing students. The program is meant to assist nurses, not replace them, the hospital said.

## Illinois

CHICAGO — Roughly 37% of eligible Chicago Public Schools students plan to return to in-person classes when the nation's third-largest school district begins reopening next month, officials said Wednesday.

CPS announced last month that the district would resume in-person learning in phases in early 2021 because remote learning wasn't serving many students in the largely Black and Latino district where most students are low income. CPS began remote learning in March due to COVID-19.

CPS data, however, show that a disproportionate number of students expected to return are white. About 23% are white, 30% are Black, nearly 39% are Latino and about 4% are Asian. Overall student enrollment in the district is nearly 11% white, about 36% Black, nearly 47% Latino and about 4% Asian, according to the Chicago Sun-Times.

## Sports broker pleads guilty in scheme on ticket package deals

**TN** MEMPHIS — Prosecutors in Tennessee said a sports broker pleaded guilty to felony theft and must repay more than \$700,000 to investors he bilked through fraudulent high-end ticket package agreements.

Shelby County District Attorney Amy Weirich's office said Rick Barlow, 53, pleaded guilty last week and received a two-year prison sentence.

Prosecutors say between June 2012 and April 2019, Barlow claimed to be a high-end corporate hospitality agent and sports event broker who bought and sold event packages for a profit.

Barlow promised packages for high-profile events, but instead used the money to pay off debts and expenses.

## Murder suspect flees van stopped at McDonald's

**IN** GARY — A man charged with murder escaped by jumping through an open window in a transport van while it was stopped at a McDonald's, Lake County Sheriff Oscar Martinez Jr. said.

Leon Taylor, 22, was being taken from Texas to Lake County by an agent from REDI Transports of Green Bay, Wis., when Taylor fled about 3 p.m. Monday in Gary despite wearing a chain around his midsection, handcuffs and a restraint on his leg, police said.

A manhunt by Gary and Lake County sheriff's police, including a helicopter and K-9 units, was unable to locate Taylor following his escape.

He remained at large Tuesday.

## City removes, replaces name of reviled settler from street

**WA** SPOKANE — The Spokane City Council voted unanimously Monday to change the name of Fort George Wright Drive, a street named for a now-reviled Indian fighter.

The road will be called Whistalks Way in honor of a female warrior and Spokane Indian who played a role in the resistance

against Wright in 1858.

"The Spokane Tribe worked very hard to involve tribal elders and the tribes that were directly affected by the acts of Col. George Wright," said Margo Hill, a member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians.

Wright led a violent campaign against Indian tribes to suppress their resistance as white settlers spread across the land of the Yakama, Palouse, Coeur d'Alene and Spokane tribes in the mid-19th century.

## NOAA creates new slow zone to protect endangered whales

**MA** NANTUCKET — Federal authorities are implementing a speed restriction zone southeast of Nantucket due to the presence of an endangered species of whale in the area.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said the voluntary vessel speed restriction zone was triggered by an observation of North Atlantic right whales on Dec. 14. The whales number 366 in the world, and they are vulnerable to ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear.

NOAA has asked mariners to avoid the area altogether or travel through it at 10 knots or less. The whales were spotted by an aerial survey team from the New England Aquarium.

The slow zone is in effect through Dec. 29, NOAA said.

## Man spared jail time for smuggling parrots

**VT** BURLINGTON — A Pennsylvania man is going to spend two years on supervised release after he had previously pleaded guilty to charges that he smuggled six parrots into the United States by carrying them across the U.S.-Canadian border, prosecutors said.

A surveillance image shows Jafet Rodriguez, 40, of Hazleton, Pa., retrieving the birds on Dec. 30, 2019, from a car parked by a library in Stanstead, Quebec.

Prosecutors said he then carried them to a car in Derby Line, Vt. He was later arrested by Border Patrol agents. Court records say experts determined that four of the birds were Yellow-headed Amazon

parrots. The other two were white-bellied Parrots. Both species are protected by an international agreement.

After his apprehension, Rodriguez said he had made arrangements with people in New York to buy the birds from someone in Canada. Rodriguez told agents he didn't know that he had crossed the border when he picked up the birds, but he said he had seen the border marker.

After being quarantined, the birds were sent to a zoo in North Carolina.

## On-duty detective accused of using drugs, causing crash

**OR** KLAMATH FALLS — A Klamath Falls Police detective has been arrested on accusations he caused a multi-vehicle crash on duty while under the influence of fentanyl taken from evidence in a police case.

Thomas Reif, 27, was booked in the Klamath County Jail on Tuesday on charges including controlled substance, impaired driving and official misconduct, according to a release from Oregon State Police, the agency handling the criminal investigation.

Witnesses told police they saw Reif driving erratically on Nov. 27 before the crash in Klamath Falls, and paramedics found Reif not conscious and not breathing at the scene. Reif was taken to a local hospital and stabilized. No other injuries were reported.

Over the weekend, evidence analyzed at a crime lab allegedly determined that Reif had been under the influence of the synthetic opioid fentanyl, according to state police. Investigators believe that Reif obtained the drug from evidence in "an unrelated case in the course of his duties."

Klamath County Jail records showed as of Tuesday afternoon, Reif was no longer in jail, the Mail Tribune reported.

Reif resigned from the police department Dec. 1 while on administrative leave and in the midst of an internal affairs investigation, according to a Klamath Falls Police Department Facebook post.

— From wire reports

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# Trask, Jones unlikely Heisman candidates

Associated Press

It's hard to imagine a much more meteoric rise to Heisman Trophy contender than that of Alabama quarterback Mac Jones, until you consider Florida's Kyle Trask.

Formerly three-star recruits with daunting paths to starting jobs but five-star perseverance and smarts, now they're perhaps the leading Heisman candidates heading into Saturday night's Crimson Tide-Gators showdown in the Southeastern Conference championship game.

It's entirely possible the Heisman could come down to that game in Atlanta. Regardless, Trask and Jones have the kind of stories that bring respect from top-ranked Crimson Tide coach Nick Saban, "guys that sort of come up the hard way."

"I know he's had a tough road coming up, just like kind of Mac," Saban said of Trask. "But I have a lot of respect for guys that stick with it, persevere, overcome a lot of adversity, go through a lot of learning and growing pains.

"Then when they get their opportunity, they take advantage of it and do extremely well. Kyle

has certainly done that and has had as fine a season as anybody in the country."

Ditto for Jones.

The numbers are impressive, but don't tell their whole stories.

Trask has already set the school season record for touchdown passes despite the shortened, SEC-only schedule. Jones's 27 TD passes ranks third nationally.

Trask is second nationally in passing yards per game (360.3), one spot ahead of Jones at 345.9.

Jones is the nation's No. 2-rated passer and Trask is fourth.

Trask appreciated the praise coming from Saban.

"It's pretty special," he said. "Coming from a legendary coach like him, it's pretty cool. We've got a lot of respect for their football team, as well. We both earned the right to be here with our play this season."

And both quarterbacks earned their spots among the nation's best in their first full seasons as starters. Both have been better than just about anybody could have expected.

A career backup, Trask played behind Miami's D'Eriq King in high school and waited

his turn behind Austin Appleby, Luke Del Rio and Feleipe Franks in Gainesville. He finally got his shot in September 2019 after Franks sustained a season-ending ankle injury.

Trask has been nothing short of sensational since, throwing 64 touchdown passes and 12 interceptions in 20 starts.

He passed 1996 Heisman Trophy winner Danny Wuerffel for the school's single-season touchdown record with No. 40 during a 37-34 loss to LSU, which likely ended any chance the Gators had of playing in the College Football Playoff.

Wuerffel called Trask after the crushing loss and reminded him that the Gators lost their regular-season finale in 1996 before rebounding to win it all.

"If we play at a higher level that I know we can, then I think we can play with anybody in America," Trask said.

Jones said he looks up to Trask as both a person and a player, especially since both opted to stick it out instead of transferring.

"I definitely have a lot of respect for Kyle, for how he's handled his situation, too," the 'Bama quarterback said. "I think

all that's just a personal decision to stay, develop personally.

"That's kind of how I looked at it. Eventually we both got our chance to help out our teams."

Jones arrived at Alabama as a skinny 180-pounder and the No. 18 pro style QB, according to the 247Sports composite ratings. More importantly, Jalen Hurts had just been named SEC offensive player of the year as a freshman and five-star prospect Tua Tagovailoa was in the same signing class. Both are now starting games in the NFL.

His shot came after Hurts transferred to Oklahoma and Tagovailoa sustained a hip injury late last season. Jones had three straight 400-yard passing games early this season, proving himself a worthy successor and then some.

"He's a guy that has had a great year," Florida coach Dan Mullen said. "Very similar to Kyle. Does a great job managing their offense, distributing the ball to all the different playmakers. Getting them in the right place at the right time. Taking what the defense gives him."

The results for both have been terrific.

## Alabama, Ohio State add 5-stars before title games

Associated Press

As Alabama, Ohio State, Clemson, Oregon, Notre Dame, Oklahoma and Florida prepared to play for conference championships, they signed top-10 recruiting classes for 2021 they hope to fuel their next title contenders.

The most unusual college football season in memory brought the convergence Wednesday of the start of the early signing period with the end of the regular season, which includes 10 conference championship games this weekend.

"I could be here all day talking about how different this is," Ohio State coach Ryan Day said on the

Big Ten Network.

The pandemic has altered much about the college football season and recruiting this year, but somethings never change. Alabama is on the way to having the highest-rated class in the country. The Buckeyes are not far behind. And it starts at the top.

According to 247 Sports' composite player rankings, there are 34 five-stars recruits in the class of 2021.

As of late Wednesday afternoon, Alabama had signed five of them and was expected to land at least one more. Ohio State landed five five-stars, including defen-

sive end Jack Sawyer from nearby Pickerington North High School.

Georgia, which has been pushing Alabama in the Southeastern Conference but not yet been able to get over the hump, has four five-stars in the fold.

That's a little less than half the five-stars in the country going to three schools.

### Bad season, good class

Michigan slogged to a 2-4 record and has dragged around speculation about coach Jim Harbaugh's future this season.

Even with the coach's future still to be determined, signing

day was OK for the Wolverines.

The bad news was four-star linebacker Branden Jennings of Jacksonville, Fla., bailed on a verbal commitment to Michigan and flipped to Big Ten division rival Maryland. Michigan also lost four-star defensive end Quintin Somerville from Scottsdale, Ariz., to UCLA.

On the positive side for the Wolverines on signing day: In-state running back Donovan Edwards, a four-star, signed with Michigan. The Wolverines also held on to four-star receiver Xavier Worthy from Fresno, Calif., who had taken a late trip to Alabama.



# Pack's Adams looks at long-term goals

Associated Press

Green Bay Packers wide receiver Davante Adams has produced a touchdown catch in each of his past eight games.

However Adams says he isn't thinking much about how long he can keep that streak going.

He has long-range goals in mind instead.

"At the end of the day, I want to be great and I want this team to be great," Adams said Wednesday. "The awards or minor achievements along the way, the weekly things, hearing stuff like that makes me feel good obviously, but that ain't what drives me. What drives me is getting the Super Bowl and ultimately trying to be the best receiver to play this game."

Adams just might be the best receiver playing right now.

Even though he missed two games with a hamstring injury earlier this season, Adams has 14 touchdown catches to tie Kansas City's Tyreek Hill for the NFL lead. He ranks fourth in the league in catches (91) and sixth in yards receiving (1,144), but leads the NFL in

both categories on a per-game basis.

"He's one of those transcendent, generational-type players, that it doesn't matter the era or the offense," Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers said. "He could be productive in any of those decades or any of those offenses."

Adams' current streak puts him in select company.

Hall of Famer Jerry Rice caught touchdown passes in 12 consecutive games in 1987. A.J. Green did it in nine straight games in 2012 for Cincinnati. They're the only players in the Super Bowl era with longer stretches within the same season of consecutive games with a touchdown pass. Adams can tie Green by catching a touchdown pass Saturday night when Green Bay (10-3) plays host to Carolina (4-9).

Adams already has shattered a Packers record that lasted nearly seven decades. Hall of Famer Don Hutson had a pair of seven-game streaks with touchdown catches during the early 1940s.

"I think about scoring touch-

downs a lot," Adams said. "I definitely think about that. But records, I let those come. I let Tom (team communication manager Tom Fanning) text me or catch me after the game and let me know if anything interesting has happened. I tend to just think about the touchdowns themselves, score and then go from there on all that stuff."

Adams also has caught at least six passes in each of these past eight games. No player in NFL history ever had at least six receptions and one touchdown catch in eight consecutive games before. The longest previous streak of this kind came in 2007, when Terrell Owens had six-plus receptions and at least one touchdown catch in seven straight games.

Since the start of the 2016 season, Adams has caught 54 touchdown passes, the most of any NFL player during that stretch. But this still represents a breakthrough season of sorts for the 2014 second-round pick from Fresno State.

Adams had only one 1,000-yard season before this year,

though he finished two years with 997. One of those 997-yard seasons came last season, when he missed four games with turf toe and caught just five touchdown passes.

The three-time Pro Bowl selection now seems poised to earn his first All-Pro honor.

Adams has spoken on multiple occasions this year about how he has tried to adopt Kobe Bryant's mentality and approach.

"If you go out and practice super hard and then you go play in the game, it's going to be a lot more natural for you," Adams said. "You'll be able to catch the ball and think fast and start making plays, making people miss and turning it into the next phase of the play rather than just catching the ball and being surprised and happy that you caught the ball."

"Those type of habits and that type of lifestyle that you build up and become accustomed to, it just becomes second nature. It's been something that I've admired from him forever, so just trying to allow that to continue to live on."

## Bills' D flexing identity in time for postseason push

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Leslie Frazier's confidence in the Buffalo Bills' defense reaching its potential never wavered even at the lowest point a month-and-a-half into the season.

The coordinator maintained faith in his veteran-laden unit and took into account the limited amount of preparation due to the coronavirus pandemic-shortened offseason. He preached patience over panic that a turnaround would happen eventually.

"I knew the character of these guys. I knew what our talent level was like, and I also understood the circumstances we

were operating under," Frazier said Monday, a day after a 26-15 win over Pittsburgh.

"It's just going to take longer than it ordinarily would," he added of an opening six-week stretch in which Buffalo ranked 25th in the NFL against the run and 24th against the pass. "I just tried to continue to encourage our guys because I knew a day like last night was coming."

Though the Bills' defensive production has been trending upward since Week 7, the payoff for Frazier was on full display when his players broke into a dance on the sideline with 7:11 remaining to celebrate Levi Wallace's interception that essentially sealed a 10th victory.

The interception punctuated the the team's most complete defensive performance of the season. Buffalo forced a season-best eight punts, limited the Steelers to convert on just one of 10 third-down opportunities, and got two turnovers, including Taron Johnson returning an interception 51 yards for the Bills' first defensive touchdown since 2017.

And it was an outing that inspires confidence in a team preparing to play at Denver (5-8) on Saturday — with a chance to clinch Buffalo's first AFC East title since 1995.

"There was a lot unexpected coming into the season," safety Jordan Poyer said. "We had

high expectations and we still do have high expectations in ourselves as a defensive unit. And us not playing our best ball earlier on in the year kind of helped us refocus our focus."

The proof is evident in the numbers.

In a 4-2 start ending with consecutive losses to Tennessee and Kansas City, the Bills were allowing an average of 28 points and 387 yards per outing. In its past seven, Buffalo has allowed 22 points and 344 yards per game. If not for giving up DeAndre Hopkins' 43-yard touchdown catch with 2 seconds left in a 32-30 loss at Arizona, the Bills would be riding a seven-game winning streak.

# Villanova gives Wright 600th victory

Associated Press

VILLANOVA, Pa. — Jay Wright flashed the “V” toward empty bleachers and then encountered a divine interception on his way to celebrate in the locker room. His face red and bundled in winter clothes, the Rev. Peter M. Donohue stopped Wright to congratulate him on his 600th career coaching victory.

Donohue, Villanova’s president, had no idea Wright was near the milestone until he heard it mentioned on TV. So he walked in the snow to the Pavilion — even in this era with no fans allowed inside the arena, a Very Important President gets a free pass — to greet Wright after the victory.

Donohue wasn’t alone in nearly missing No. 600. The Wildcats were set to head home until graduate assistants clued them in on the mark.

“I was confused because I thought somebody would have mentioned it,” guard Collin Gillespie said.

Already a two-time national champion and the winningest coach in program history, Wright won his 600th career game in the No. 7 Wildcats’ 85-66 victory over Butler on Wednesday night.

“It just means I know I have a really good job,” Wright said.

Wright (600-268) became the 39th coach in Division I history to reach 600 wins. He is 478-183 at Villanova since he was hired in 2001 and has built the Wildcats into one of the elite programs in college basketball. Wright won national championships in 2016 and 2018 and again has the preseason favorite to

win the Big East — a team expected to contend for another national title.

Wright earned the milestone in the latest home opener for Villanova since Dec. 22, 1992, against Vermont. The pandemic wreaked havoc on the schedule and Villanova had home games against Temple, Saint Joseph’s and DePaul canceled or postponed. So the Wildcats hit the road and went 4-1 in Connecticut’s “Bubbleville” and won at Texas and Georgetown.

Gillespie and Jeremiah Robinson-Earl each scored 18 points for the Wildcats (6-1, 2-0 Big East), and Justin Moore had 13.

The Pavilion was empty, and fans might have stayed home anyway in a normal year on a night when a major winter storm dumped several inches of snow on campus.

“It didn’t even seem like our place,” Wright said.

Butler landed safely on Monday night to prepare for just its second game of the season, and first in 21 days after the program paused due to COVID-19 protocols. The 21-day in-season break was believed to be the longest between games in Butler history.

Jair Bolden scored 18 points and helped the Bulldogs (1-1, 0-1 Big East) stay competitive with three-pointers that kept them within two in the second half.

**No. 11 Texas 79, Sam Houston State 63:** Courtney Ramey and Greg Brown scored 17 points apiece for the host Longhorns.

Ramey, a junior, also had six assists and matched his career best with five three-pointers. Brown, a freshman, grabbed 10 re-

bounds, made two steals and blocked two shots.

Andrew Jones added 13 points for Texas (6-1). Zach Nutall led the Bearkats State (3-5) with 23.

**Purdue 67, No. 20 Ohio State 60:** Trevion Williams scored 16 points and came close to a triple-double for the host Boilermakers.

Williams had nine rebounds and a career-high eight assists in his second game coming off the bench. Eric Hunter Jr. added a season-best 15 points as Matt Painter beat a ranked team for the 50th time in 16 seasons as Purdue’s coach.

The Boilermakers (5-2, 1-0 Big Ten) have won two straight and four of their last five.

Justice Sueing led the Buckeyes (5-1, 0-1) with 14 points and Duane Washington Jr. had 13.

**No. 21 Duke 75, Notre Dame 65:** Sophomore forward Matthew Hurt scored 18 points and three Blue Devils freshmen also cracked double digits as Duke opened Atlantic Coast Conference play with a road win.

DJ Steward had 16 points to go with seven rebounds, while Jeremy Roach scored 14 and Jaemyn Brakefield added 10 for the Blue Devils (3-2, 1-0), who led from the second minute onward.

Duke (3-2, 1-0) entered the game in jeopardy of falling below .500 for the first time since 1999.

Dane Goodwin scored 25 points for the Fighting Irish (2-3, 0-1), hitting 10 of 12 shots from the field with four three-pointers.

## NCAA will allow blanket waivers for all transfers

Associated Press

The NCAA’s Division I Council has granted blanket waivers for all athletes to play immediately.

The NCAA’s announcement Wednesday includes all Division I sports, but is contingent on certain criteria.

Transfers previously were required to sit out a season unless granted a waiver by the NCAA. The NCAA had decided on waivers on a case-by-case basis, but had been more lenient as the coronavirus pandemic depleted rosters.

“The Council continued its

trend of voting in favor of maximum flexibility for student-athletes during the pandemic,” said Council chair M. Grace Calhoun, athletic director at Pennsylvania. “Allowing transfer student-athletes to compete immediately will provide additional opportunities to student-athletes during this continued difficult time, and perhaps allow games to be played that otherwise might not have been.”

The decision should have an immediate impact on basketball programs, with some transfers becoming eligible for games on Wednesday. Among the players

who should give their programs a big boost include Creighton’s Alex O’Connell, Memphis’ DeAndre Williams, Miami’s Elijah Olaniyi, Xavier’s Ben Stanley and Notre Dame’s Trey Wertz.

“I tip my cap to @NCAA for their forward thinking by passing today’s transfer waiver,” Notre Dame coach Mike Brey tweeted. “It will help multiple sports, student-athletes & programs stay healthy & competitive as we try to remain on course through this pandemic.”

The waiver only applies to transfers from other Division I

schools. The regular transfer waiver process will be used for non-Division I transfers.

Transfers must be enrolled fulltime at the current school for the 2020 fall term and it must be their first transfer from a four-year school. Transfers must have left their previous school in good standing academically and are not facing disciplinary suspension. The NCAA’s Division Council is expected to consider permanent transfer rules at a meeting next month that would allow all athletes to transfer once without having to sit out a year.